

BLACKBOX

Simulation n° 7744

Carlo Passoni

Each BlackBox is a written reality, ready to spring to life the moment you read. Your neurons, your synapses, become the spark that brings it into being in a very particular space-time: your mind. That doesn't mean it's any less real; on the contrary, precisely because it lives inside your mind, it's more real than anything else.

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CHAPTER I

The end of the beginning

"Dear citizens of Earth, I'm Dr. Adam Venerus, Chief Technology Officer of Zenith Intelligence. It's with great fascination and fear that I announce I've managed to recreate our reality inside the most advanced quantum computer in the world: the Qubix.

What does this mean? For me, just one thing: if I was able to simulate our Reality, then our reality too is a simulation, because every copy presupposes an original, and any original that can be reproduced can no longer be called unique.

If the Qubix was able to generate physical laws, events, and even digital consciousnesses that believe they exist... what proof do we have that we're not the product of a greater system ourselves? All I did was reverse-engineer and structure the simulation with the parameters of our own reality, including the psychological mechanisms of the human mind, which can also be reproduced through code.

Because everything is code, everything is information. Just think of the basis of life itself, DNA, which is pure and undeniable code. To me, the situation is clear: we're living inside a simulation.

Now, my only doubt lies in the mode, which also determines the purpose. The first hypothesis, the most likely one (85%), is that of a collective simulation. In this scenario, the entire universe: every person, animal, organism, plant, planet and star, would be nothing more than part of a single program. We're all computed entities, born and sustained by an unimaginably powerful substrate.

Consciousness, in this case, isn't an inexplicable miracle but an emergent phenomenon. If the laws of physics, biology, and brain processes are simulated with enough accuracy, then intelligence and self-awareness arise as inevitable consequences. A simulated consciousness wouldn't be distinguishable, from its own perspective, from an original one. We believe we exist because the simulation is precise enough to produce the illusion of life itself. If the model is faithful, it generates the same effects. The purposes could be many:

- To study the behavior of complex societies, observing wars, cooperations, collapses and rebirths.*
- To examine natural and cosmological phenomena without risk or the need to wait astronomical timescales.*
- To analyze the evolution of life and consciousness, in order to better understand the fundamental laws that govern Zero Reality, the original one.*
- Or perhaps simply for entertainment, creating universes where stories unfold on their own, autonomous and unpredictable.*

The second hypothesis, less likely (15%), is that of an individual simulation. In this framework, the entire universe would exist only for a single real observer, the only external "Player." Everyone else, myself included, would be simulated entities created to give credibility to that experience.

The purpose could be educational: offering someone the chance to live entire lifetimes to learn moral, emotional, educational and intellectual lessons. Or it might be pure entertainment, an all-encompassing role-playing game in which one lives an entire life without ever knowing it is a simulation.

In this case, the memory of the experience wouldn't remain inside the simulation but would instead be recorded elsewhere, in the mind of the real Player. That Player couldn't realize it, wouldn't be aware of it, because the illusion is necessary: only by believing in the reality does the experience hold value.

There's still much more information I want to share with you, and just as many doubts that deserve discussion. But for now, in this video, I'll stop here. If you'd like to go deeper, I'm considering organizing a Q&A session, let me know if you'd be interested."

A few days later, Dr. Venerus's video went viral across social media, sparking reactions of every kind.

The phone rang. It was Silas Kaine, CEO of Zenith Intelligence.

«Hello?»

«Adam, the board has decided to terminate your position effective immediately.»

A sharp beep marked the end of the call. «I knew this would happen,» Adam muttered with regret, still holding the phone in his hand.

Overcome with conflicting emotions, he poured himself a glass of whiskey with ice. Then he dropped onto the couch and switched on the MindStream, looking for a nature documentary. After flipping through a couple of channels, accompanied by a bitter sip, he stumbled on the news.

Dr. Venerus's video still dominated the headlines, followed by reports showing society falling apart. Adam remained frozen on the couch, listening to the clinking ice in his glass as the voices of reporters alternated with footage.

A group of young people shouted slogans in the streets, waving signs that read: «Nothing is real.» Moments later, the broadcast showed shattered shop windows, stores set on fire, overturned cars. The journalist commented in an uncertain tone: «Many justify these acts of vandalism by saying that if everything is a simulation, then nothing has value.» Adam took a slow sip. The footage changed again: tense faces, tears, messages left on social media. The first suicides. On the screen appeared the profiles of

young people who had recorded their final words. «If it isn't real, then nothing matters,» one of them said in a desperate video filmed on his phone.

Adam leaned forward, now in a posture far from relaxed. He set the glass down on the table. Unable to change the channel, he kept watching the news. The chaos, born from a single announcement, was now taking shape before his eyes.

«What the hell is happening,» he whispered in disbelief.

The journalist continued, his voice tight: «A new development is now alarming the authorities. In the past few hours, a radical movement calling itself Order ZeroxZero has emerged. This sect interprets the so-called Qubix Theory, named after Dr. Venerus's video, exclusively in its individual simulation version, claiming it justifies the destruction of the established order.

According to investigative sources, members have already claimed responsibility for violent acts in the streets and spread proclamations online inciting global chaos. Authorities urge maximum caution, describing the group as potentially even more dangerous after these recent developments.»

The scientist jumped to his feet and grabbed the phone to call back the CEO of Zenith Intelligence.

«Silas, you know very well this was my Telos.»

«You should have consulted me before publishing that video, we could have found a better solution.»

«No, you would've only offered me a corporate solution, stopping me from expressing myself the way I needed to. I had to prove it to the whole world, you've always known that.»

«We're not kids anymore, Adam. We're the co-founders of the most capitalized and important company in the world. Everything we say carries weight, as you can clearly see from the consequences.»

«Silas, it's essential that nothing is ever extracted from the Qubix. No one could control it or predict it.»

«In the name of our old friendship, I thank you for everything you've created. And it's precisely because of this sincere recognition that I want to give you one final advantage. You've been officially charged with terrorism and violation of top security secrets. They're already coming for you. You have five minutes to escape. This is the last advantage I'll grant you.»

The call ended abruptly.

Dr. Venerus's heart started pounding in his chest, faster and faster. He didn't waste a second: he grabbed his jacket and rushed toward the lab in his house. With trembling yet swift hands, he stuffed into his backpack a few devices, pieces of technology he deemed essential for the escape.

He was about to open the front door when a chilling detail struck him. Outside, in the dark of the street, several headlights were visible — vehicles never before seen in the neighborhood, men moving with unusual coordination, and an unnatural silence, as if the whole world was holding its breath.

Instinctively, he turned and ran downstairs. He entered his room, dropped to the floor, and dragging the backpack with him, crawled under the bed. With a precise movement, he pressed his fingertip against a recessed tile in the floor. A dull click, and a hidden trapdoor opened. The stairs descending into darkness led to an underground tunnel.

He slipped inside, carefully closing the passage behind him, determined to leave no trace of his path.

An instant later, the house exploded with noise: the front door was smashed in with a single blow, while windows and glass shattered into a thousand pieces under the coordinated impact of armed agents. A whole squad swarmed the dwelling, searching every room with brutality.

«Negative! He's not here!» shouted Agent Ashford, checking every corner.

Colonel Nyx's communication was swift: «Mr. Kaine, we did not find Dr. Venerus at his residence. The perimeter was secured, he could not have escaped. Do you have any idea where he might be hiding?»

On the other end, Silas Kaine's voice was cold: «There's a trapdoor under the bed.»

«What?! Why didn't you tell us earlier?!»

A pause, then the curt reply:

«We're talking about top secret national security information. I couldn't disclose it lightly.»

«Mr. Kaine, I need clear and immediate answers. Where does this trapdoor lead?»

Meanwhile, the agents placed sonic nano-technology charges: the hidden hatch gave way with a muffled roar. Nyx cut the transmission, descended the stairs first followed by his men, and ran into the underground tunnel until they came across a massive door. Its size and thickness made its indestructibility obvious at a glance.

«Mr. Kaine, we have a problem. We're facing the entrance to a bunker: it doesn't look easy to open.»

«That's not an ordinary bunker, Colonel. It's the Planetary Ark Dome.»

«A what?!» Nyx exclaimed, disoriented.

«A refuge designed by Dr. Venerus and personally funded by me. It's self-sufficient, able to withstand global catastrophes and even cosmic impacts. It was obvious it couldn't be made public.»

«What do you mean by self-sufficient? For how long? What materials was it built with?»

«Colonel Nyx, drop it. Any attempt at penetration will fail: the P.A.D. is built with a technology capable of resisting meteor impacts and extremely high-energy exposures. After all, it's the work of the brightest mind of our era.»

Nyx swallowed a curse, then answered in a hard tone:

«With all due respect, Mr. Kaine, this wouldn't have happened if you had informed us from the start. Right now we have a global security crisis: a potential terrorist, the man most capable of destroying the planet, is on the run. I represent the government forces, and there shouldn't be secrets with me.»

Kaine's voice turned sharp:

«Colonel, if you want to play the 'I represent' game, I represent the most powerful and richest corporation in the world. Eighty percent of global technology depends on our services and products. Do you really want to argue about who's in charge? If you still don't get it, Zenith Intelligence gives orders to governments, not the other way around. So, as a good soldier, obey your superior's superior. Understood?»

«...»

«UNDERSTOOD?!»

«Received,» Nyx replied through clenched teeth.
«What are the orders?»

«Leave a couple of agents guarding the P.A.D. entrance and come to my headquarters immediately.»

Arriving at headquarters, Colonel Nyx was immediately greeted by Silas in his private office.

«Colonel, now that we're alone, I'll answer your questions. After that, I expect you to follow my orders.»

«I accept,» Nyx said, collapsing into the chair with a regretful sigh.

Silas laced his fingers on the table. «The Planetary Ark Dome, or P.A.D., was born from Adam's paranoia that a meteor or a world war could wipe the planet out. He wanted an indestructible refuge, a self-sufficient and isolated environment where he could continue his research undisturbed. He threatened to resign if the request wasn't granted. At the time we were designing the CRANE, and his mind was indispensable. So I decided to fund what looked like madness, but that actually turned out to be one of his greatest discoveries.»

He paused, almost pleased. «Adam asked himself one question: how to obtain infinite energy? The answer was bold: create a miniature black hole and turn it into the heart of the P.A.D.

With the help of his androids he compressed a small amount of matter until collapse, generating a singularity. He imprisoned it in a gravitational cage, wrapped in plasma capable of capturing its energy.»

Nyx's eyes widened. Silas continued, «To remain stable, the black heart must be fed. You don't need fuels, uranium, or oil: a few grams of mass per day are enough. Anything: metals, dust, organic waste... Adam joked that even his own excrement could fuel infinite energy, and so it did. From there he created a perfect ecosystem cycle.»

«And the oxygen? The water? The food?» Nyx asked, incredulous.

«Every molecule of exhaled CO₂ is captured and converted back into oxygen. The moisture from lungs and air vapor is condensed into water. Urine is distilled and filtered at the molecular level until it's drinkable again. For food, a 4D printer with an extensive biological library reproduces any preserved organic material.»

Nyx shook his head. «How big is it?»

«One kilometer in diameter. Inside there are three androids for assistance, and a fourth robotic body awaiting future mental transcendence. The P.A.D. is a refuge, but also an extremely advanced laboratory.»

Nyx pressed on, «And the walls? If we used our military nanotechnologies, we might find a weakness.»

Silas smiled. «Your technologies come from the same teams Adam formed. You can't imagine how far his private tech is beyond what's commercialized. Anyway, if you want an image: the walls follow Adam's philosophy. Divert, with electromagnetic fields; cushion, with sacrificial layers; absorb, with reactive fluids; and regenerate, via nanoparticles in constant motion. A system that adapts, heals, and multiplies. You wouldn't even get past the first layer. Adam will remain in there for a long time.»

Nyx stood up abruptly. «So what is your plan, Mr. Kaine?»

Silas stared into his eyes. «Adam is not a terrorist. He only believes in the free spread of knowledge. The real terrorists are others. You already know that group...»

«Order ZeroxZero?»

«Exactly. I decided to give you an advantage. We cross-referenced data and facial recognition. The founding leaders are a certain Maleye Godwin and his girl, Nikita Nyx.»

The colonel went pale.

Silas tilted his head to the right. «How long has it been since you last saw your daughter, Colonel Mikhail Nyx? I imagine you'd be interested in resolving this matter personally...»

«N... it can't be...» he stammered, stepping back toward the exit, his voice broken by contained panic.

Silas pierced him with an icy look. «They are the real enemies to eliminate. My secretary will hand you the files with all the members. I expect great results from you, Colonel. Do not disappoint me.»

He extended his hand with a mocking smile. Mikhail hesitated for a moment, then shook it.

CHAPTER II

Order 0x0

The artificial and the natural were destined to clash. Despite the comforts and advantages that technology had brought, especially with the advent of Quantum Intelligence, a significant portion of the population remained opposed to its use. The main accusation was simple: QI replicated content by drawing from an infinite sea of data taken from human artists, who had found themselves stripped of income, recognition, and dignity.

From that fracture a radical political movement was born, the Clochard. The name, deliberately provocative, identified people who rejected all digital technology, choosing to live far from the megalopolises. They founded villages and communities where such devices were banned, giving priority to direct contact with the natural elements.

Zackary and Elizabeth Godwin, husband and wife, were the founders and faces of the Clochard movement. Their voices gathered the growing discontent: among artists frustration was palpable, many complained about the impossibility of creating something genuine, something capable of surprising eyes now dulled by the inhuman standards imposed by machines.

The protests exploded. The first demonstrations turned violent in front of Zenith Intelligence headquarters. That was when a young Silas Kaine decided to intervene: he invited the two Clochard leaders to a live debate, under the eyes of journalists. Zackary and Elizabeth accepted, without realizing they had just signed the beginning of what would go down in history as “HumanSlop”.

That day, millions of viewers connected through MindStream, the device that projected online content directly into the mind via neural impulses. Lovers and detractors of technology immersed themselves in the same flow, ready to witness the confrontation that would mark an era.

Everything was ready. The lights were set. Three... two... one...

«Good evening, dear viewers, I am Katherine Roberts, and I welcome you to this much-anticipated debate between the CEO of Zenith Intelligence, Mr. Silas Kaine, and the leaders of the Clochard movement, Zackary and Elizabeth Godwin. Welcome.»

«Good evening, Katherine, it’s always a pleasure to be your guest,» replied Silas, with a charisma crafted to enchant the audience.

«Let's begin. Zackary, Elizabeth, what would you like to obtain from Zenith? What change are you asking for?»

Zackary spoke first, with Elizabeth nodding beside him. «We want justice for all artists, past and present, robbed of their own art. Your artificial intelligences have turned years of work and sacrifice into copies mixed and generated randomly by algorithms—»

Silas cut him off, breaking the rhythm. «I'm sorry, Zackary, but I have to correct you right away. We've already paid hefty fines for any potential violations, and I'd like to clarify that these new intelligences don't just mix at random. They possess genuine chains of thought, contextual coherence, and awareness of the subject matter.»

Elizabeth shot back sharply: «When you speak of fines, are you referring to that total 2% of your annual revenue? Do you really think that's an adequate penalty?»

Silas smiled at the camera. «That 2% equals three trillion WorldCoin poured into the coffers of the Confederation, redistributed as universal income. It's not about percentage, it's about impact: Zenith Intelligence has improved the lives of billions of people. We've clarified the terms and conditions, and 99.5% of users accepted them without hesitation.

So I wonder, isn't this perhaps just the childish frustration of a few artists incapable of keeping up with evolution?»

Elizabeth stared at him with pain in her eyes. «Do you really think an algorithm can replace experience, feelings, pain, human passion?»

«Absolutely yes. Not to belittle humanity, but to elevate it. We have tools that surpass our limits, and that makes us masters of something greater than ourselves. I don't see any downside in that, except for the arrogance of the few who cling to an artistic specialty that has already become obsolete.»

Zackary replied: «If only people had the chance to savor once more the magnificence of human art, your company would collapse.»

Silas burst out laughing. «Ahahah... some people simply don't know their own limits.» Then suddenly he stopped: an inspired look crossed his face. «In fact, you know what? I accept the challenge. If we want spectacle and engagement, fine: let the people decide if human art is truly superior to artificial art. If the polls prove you right, I will shut down Zenith Intelligence immediately.»

Katherine's eyes widened. «What do you mean, Mr. Kaine?»

Silas rose slightly from his chair, grinning. «A worldwide contest. On your channel, contents will be published side by side: images, texts, music. Anyone can participate. Our users will generate with QI, while the Clochard and other artists can produce “native human art.” The works will be shown without labels, in anonymous form. Every day, for thirty consecutive days, from 9 p.m. to 11:59 p.m., people will vote. At midnight, partial results will be announced. At the end of the thirty days, the average will determine the absolute winner.»

Zackary and Elizabeth were left speechless, unable to react.

Silas pressed on: «Well, I think this proposal exceeds even your own expectations. And Katherine, I’ve just done you a favor: I want an independent platform, free from influence, like yours, for this kind of event.»

The journalist was stunned, managing only to nod with an uncertain smile.

Silas turned toward the cameras. «And I’ll end with this: do you remember when AI-generated art used to be called AI-slop? Well, at the end of this challenge, what will be called slop will be human art. See you soon, and good evening.»

He stood proudly, shook hands with those present, and left them visibly shaken.

The broadcast ended. Within a few hours, the challenge went viral: the duel between human and artificial art had just begun, and the entire world suddenly found itself both competitor and judge at the same time.

The Clochard community welcomed Zackary and Elizabeth as moral victors: they had achieved what had once seemed impossible, a concrete chance to bring Zenith Intelligence to its knees through art. «It couldn't have gone better,» they thought, full of hope.

The challenge began.

On the first day, no one knew what to expect. Who would prevail? After all, much of the population had long forgotten what true human art was like.

The excitement was palpable. At the stroke of midnight, billions of connected users awaited the first results. The screen revealed a crushing figure: 77.44% of the votes went to works generated with QI. The shock was universal. Not only the public, but even the Clochard themselves realized that, without knowing, people had voted for artificial works, deeming them superior.

Day after day, the figure grew relentlessly: 80%, then 90%, until the twenty-ninth day reached an astounding 98.5%

It was the ultimate proof: even the sworn enemies of technology had unknowingly voted for QI-produced content. A total defeat for native human art.

Zackary and Elizabeth were on the brink of depression, along with their entire community. Morale had collapsed below zero. That was when Silas Kaine, with his sharp smile, decided to strike. Facing the cameras, he addressed the two leaders directly:

«Dear Zackary and Elizabeth, even though the challenge is practically over, I want to give you one last advantage. You are the faces of your movement, considered the greatest contemporary artists. Well then, I'll raise the stakes. I don't care about risks or the board's opinions. I am CEO and founder, and my word is final. And I assure the shareholders: I always win. Here is my challenge. We will create a complete work: a painting accompanied by music and a short written poem. You two against me. The confrontation will be anonymous. If you win, I will shut down Zenith immediately. If you lose, you will forever renounce any form of protest, acknowledging the supremacy of my artificial systems.»

The proposal fell like a hammer. Zackary and Elizabeth discussed it at length with their community. In truth, by accepting, they were betraying their own principles: legitimizing a battleground set by their enemy and, in effect, surrendering any future claims.

Yet, despite the doubts, they decided to go all-in. It was their last chance. The couple's extraordinary artistic talent rekindled a spark of hope among their supporters.

The news quickly reached the press. Within hours, the announcement of the "special event" spread across the globe. The following day, the entire population prepared to witness the final duel, an unprecedented direct confrontation.

Zackary and Elizabeth returned home with a single mission: to create humanity's ultimate cross-disciplinary work of art. Time was short. They couldn't rely on complexity or technique: they had to strike at the heart, awaken the call of human feelings. They had to rely on simplicity.

«Maleye, Miriam! Come here!» they shouted with excitement, calling their children.

The two kids came running, their eyes full of joy. «Yaaaay! What do we need to do?»

Elizabeth smiled, placing a large white canvas in front of them. «Look at it closely. Imagine what you'd like to see on it.»

There was no hesitation. Just a few seconds were enough for the children to burst into a whirlwind of ideas, shouting with bright voices, gesturing with uncontrollable energy.

Zackary and Elizabeth took their children's hands and dipped them into the paint. The colorful handprints began to dance across the canvas, slowly transforming into images.

A deep blue sky, cut through by seven golden stars. At the center, four glowing hands resting on the brown earth.

In the foreground, red flowers in bloom, thin blades of grass, two eyes emerging like glimpses of consciousness.

In the background, a clear sun dissolved the shadows.

Elizabeth, overwhelmed with emotion, rushed to pick up the violin and sat at the piano. The melody flowed through her fingers as if it had always been there, hidden inside her, waiting for that very moment.

Meanwhile, Zackary, with his gaze fixed on the still-fresh canvas, grabbed his notebook.

The words came to him in a rush, as if the poem had always been written inside, only waiting to be spoken aloud:

“Four gentle hands,
caressing the ground,
born as humankind,
where no lies are found.

Seven notes are singing, drifting through the blue,
seven dreams take wing, never to renew,
seven stars are burning, guiding children’s way,
seven hearts united, stronger every day,
seven steps are rising, toward the endless height,
seven rays are glowing, fingers touched with light,
seven voices whisper, calling soft and slow.

Four crimson flowers,
open in the sun,
four searching eyes,
long for words undone.

Seven seas are swelling, waves of hopeful sound,
seven wings are dancing, circling all around,
seven hands of children, holding love so tight,
seven lightning flashes, breaking frozen night,
seven blades of meadow, singing with the morn,
seven cradles tender, guard the paths unborn,
seven shining lanterns, dream of days to come.

Zero tears are left,
only love will stay.
Zero shadows left,
a newborn sun will blaze.”

Silas's work was the apotheosis of technical mastery. The painting depicted a faceless man who, with waxen hands, molded masks bearing different expressions: joy, pain, anger, ecstasy. All of it executed with the geometric precision of Picasso and the chromatic power of Van Gogh. An explosion of forms and colors calibrated to the millimeter, a spectacle conceived to impress and intimidate.

The soundtrack was a flawless fusion: the epic impact of Hans Zimmer blended with the emotional delicacy of Ludovico Einaudi. Every note was calculated to steer the viewer's feelings, to drag them into a carefully engineered vortex of emotion.

And the poem?

"For the man who cannot tell his tale,
for the man whom the mirror blinds with veil,
for the man who dares not look beyond the glass,
offering his Ego, a part to let pass.

For the good of others, for harmony's thread,
masks become tools by which life is led,
a subtle craft that mankind can design,
to dwell together, without endless strife.

O dearest Freedom, I long for you unbound,
without the chains, without fate's sound.
O dearest Ego, how I wish you fed,
fulfilled, completed... yet always unsaid.

O dearest Life, how I wish you true,
pure and whole, without the rue.
Yet deep I know, with sorrow near,
that you are no longer mine to hold dear.”

Of course, all of it had been produced through Silas’s prompts and painstakingly detailed descriptions. It wasn’t a spontaneous creation of Quantum Intelligence, but the result of a lucid, premeditated intention. Yet the execution, the precision, the details... made all the difference.

Vote after vote, midnight arrived. A violent storm struck the land, as if nature itself wanted to mirror human tension. In the midst of that climatic chaos, the results appeared directly in people’s minds: 66.6% for Silas, 33.3% for the Godwins, 0.1% voluntary abstentions.

The Clochard community, which for thirty days had exceptionally agreed to use the MindStream, watching together as if in a collective ritual, fell silent. Then, disappointed, they removed the magnetic cookies from their temples one by one, throwing them to the ground with contempt.

It was progress nonetheless: from a miserable 1.5% to 33.3%. But it was not enough. It was no victory, no revenge. Only a bitter consolation.

After pats on the back and regretful compliments, Zackary and Elizabeth returned home. Their children welcomed them with the naïve optimism only

children can have, but in the eyes of the parents there was no light. Only emptiness.

They tucked Maleye and Miriam into bed.

Outside the storm raged, rain hammered the ground and the windows, thunder and lightning split the sky. The bedroom door closed softly. In the living room, under the faint glow of a lamp, Zackary and Elizabeth sat facing each other. A bottle of scotch between them, silence as their only companion.

Something in their minds broke. Rationality gave way to an irreparable sense of failure. All that was left was the void, and the need to silence it. The sound of rain covered their sobs. The wind masked the screech of chairs dragged to the center of the room.

The thunder, finally, covered the fall into the abyss.

Dawn rose clear. The sky was blue, birds were singing, and the world seemed unaware of anything. Maleye, the eldest at ten years old, woke up first. His sister Miriam, seven, was still asleep, curled up. He quietly opened the door and walked toward the living room.

He had not yet lifted his eyes when he saw two long shadows sliding across the floor, cast by the sun toward his feet. The shadows offered him what he never wanted to see in the light. He understood instantly. A tear fell before he had truly seen. He had already guessed everything.

With his heart in his throat, he found the courage to look up. Meanwhile, Miriam, still sleepy, was making her way toward him. Maleye rushed to intercept her.

«Do you want to play a game?» he said with a broken voice, his red eyes holding back a flood of tears ready to burst.

«Why are you crying, Mal?» she asked innocently.

«Because... I just remembered it's your birthday today, and I haven't given you a present yet.»

Miriam's eyes lit up. «Ohhh, that's right! Today is my birthday! How nice! What are we going to do to celebrate?»

Maleye swallowed the pain and smiled as best he could. «Close your eyes. I'll take you to a special place.»

He lifted her in his arms, letting her rest her head on his shoulder, and stepped outside. A fresh breeze brushed their hair. In shock and irrational desperation, he began to walk, without direction, with only one goal: to get as far away as possible.

As the hours passed, his strength left him. His arms grew weak.

He set his sister down on the ground, and they continued hand in hand.

Hunger, thirst, and exhaustion began to weigh on them. Miriam complained, Maleye's legs trembled, his head spun violently.

In the midst of the wild nature, alone and without help, the brother gave what would be his last look to his sister. Those hazel eyes, the rosy chubby cheeks, the little scar on her cheekbone that made her so unique. He tried to speak a word, but it died in his throat. Then came darkness. He collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

«Hey kid, can you hear me? Wake up, wake up! Try to stay conscious! Quick, bring an IV!» shouted the nurse.

Maleye slowly opened his eyes, disoriented. «Where... where am I?»

«You're in a hospital, don't worry. You're safe,» the woman replied as she hooked the needle into his arm and let the fluid flow into his vein.

Suddenly the boy jolted awake. «MIRIAM! Where's my sister?! Where's my sister, she was with me!» His strength failed him, and he fell back into darkness.

Six hours later he woke again, screaming his little sister's name. The nurses rushed into the room,

followed by two police officers who were monitoring the case.

«Kid, do you have any relatives? Anyone besides your parents, any family figure we can turn to?» asked one of the officers gravely. They had already checked: through facial recognition and cross-data, what they feared had been confirmed. The neighbors had found the door open that morning, and inside, the bodies of his parents hanging.

Maleye lowered his gaze. «No,» he whispered, his voice broken.

The officers left the room in search of solutions. But in the chaos, they forgot the investigation file on the nightstand. Maleye noticed it. In pain, he dragged himself over, reached it, and began to read.

The pages revealed what had been denied to him. A Zenith Intelligence drone, during a patrol toward the megalopolis, had intercepted two lives in danger. When rescuers arrived, the scene was harrowing: Miriam had tried to drag her unconscious brother's body but failed.

Exhausted, dehydrated, hyperventilating, she lost consciousness. Her fragile body could not withstand the stress. She died shortly after. Maleye, however, had been found still alive, with only a thread of breath.

The boy's hands trembled as he read those lines. His heart tightened in an inescapable grip. The death of

his parents. The death of his sister. And above all, the awareness that he had been the one to take her away, the one who had dragged her into the abyss.

«Why? Why did I do it? Why didn't I ask for help? Why didn't I stay there?! Why?! Why?!» he screamed into the void, biting his lips until they bled.

In the days that followed, the inner torture gave him no respite. But slowly, the pain turned into something else. A black fire.

After a week, his vital signs stabilized. He was discharged from the hospital and assigned to the only orphanage still functioning: the Domus Lux.

And there, something inside him ignited. The questions ceased. In their place arose a single answer, fierce, relentless.

Vengeance.

Maleye's eyes filled with hatred. His jaw clenched. His hands closed into fists. He was no longer a child mourning the loss of his family. He was the seed of a future executioner.

Ready to turn pain into a weapon.

The news channels spread the story shamelessly, exposing the tragedy as if it were gossip. At the orphanage, it didn't take long for everyone to know. And the children, with that instinctive cruelty only they know how to wield, began to whisper about the new arrival.

«There he is... he's the one who killed his sister.»

The words pierced Maleye's ears like blades. Blood rushed to his head. With a sudden outburst, he attacked the two who had been whispering. Two quick, precise punches, one to each: straight to the face. One fell with a split lip, the other's cheekbone swelled and bruised.

The other children screamed and ran away, creating chaos. The educators rushed into the recreation area. One of them grabbed him and struck him with a loud slap, then dragged him away by force. Punishment. Dark room. Meal skipped.

Maleye sat on the bed with his knuckles still stained with blood. He didn't even try to clean them: he would let them dry as they were, as a mark, as a reminder of his first violent act.

At the orphanage, children were assigned to rooms in pairs, based on sex, order of arrival, and availability. That night, Maleye was still alone, without a roommate. At least until, in the silence of that night, the door suddenly opened.

An educator appeared on the threshold, with a little girl at his side. Dark blond hair, blue eyes, freckles, a slightly upturned nose. Like a princess out of a fairy tale.

«Maleye, this is Nikita. She just arrived. For now she'll sleep here, then we'll find her a place with another girl.»

The door closed behind them.

The little girl, immediately tried out her new bed by jumping on it. The springs creaked noisily. «It's a bit old... but it'll do...»

Maleye didn't answer. Turned away, he curled up under the blanket. He had no interest. To him, she was just another stranger. He closed his eyes, determined to return to the darkness of his thoughts. The next morning, faint light filtered through the dirty windows of Domus Lux. Maleye was already awake, sitting on the edge of the bed, his black curls tousled, his gaze fixed on the floor where an ant struggled to carry a stale cookie crumb from days ago. His knuckles were still red and cracked. Nikita stretched on her creaky bed, then studied him curiously. She didn't speak right away. She observed him the way you observe a wounded animal, unsure whether it will attack or run.

«Are you the one who fought yesterday?» she finally asked, without hesitation.

Maleye, his emerald-green eyes barely lifting, replied, «So what?»

She smiled, showing a slightly chipped tooth. «Then I like you. I hate those who talk too much and never do anything.»

He went back to staring at the floor, watching the ant's movements. Nikita noticed it, stood up, and crushed the insect with a swift gesture. «It's not in its place,» she said as she picked up the tiny body with her fingers and tossed it out the window.

The hum of the cafeteria went silent the moment Maleye walked in. Tray in hand, eyes down, he searched for a seat, but a voice pierced the air. «There he is... the sister-bane.»

A chorus of giggles followed the provocation. Maleye froze. Blood boiled in his veins. He was about to react, but he didn't have the chance: Nikita, walking just behind him, grabbed the apple from his tray and hurled it precisely at the chest of the boy who had spoken.

Then she stepped toward him. Her head tilted slightly to the left, her eyes gleaming with a smile that was anything but friendly. «Sisterbane?» she repeated in a soft, almost amused voice.

The boy who had spoken stepped back slightly, unsettled by her unnatural calm. «Y-yeah, everyone knows it.»

«Then be careful how you use your mouth,» she whispered, tilting her head even further. «Because you might lose your tongue.»

The boy turned pale. But his friend, trying to save his honor, leapt up and moved to shove Nikita.

In that instant, Maleye, with a lightning-quick move, raised his tray and slammed it down hard on the back of the friend's head, knocking him out before he could even touch her.

Silence fell heavy. No one dared move. No one dared laugh.

Nikita slowly turned to Maleye. For a moment she stared at him without speaking, then gave a faint smile. «You defend me, I defend you.»

The educators, shocked by the scene, rushed in and dragged them both away. Immediate punishment. «Breakfast is over, you two come with us.»

Back in their room, the two sat on the bed facing each other, legs crossed. Silence lingered for a moment, until Maleye, curiosity flickering in his eyes, asked:

«Why are you here?»

Nikita lowered her gaze, tracing a finger along the seams of the sheet. «My father... after my mother died, he decided to leave me here. He says it's for my own good, that he can't take care of me. He works in the special forces.»

Maleye stayed silent, confused. Then he asked softly: «And... are you angry with him?»

«A little, yes.» Nikita raised her eyes, which looked larger and brighter than usual. «He's always treated me like a soldier. No games, no dolls. Only drills.

Marches, exercises, weapons dismantled and reassembled. It's like I never had a childhood. I don't even know what I feel for him anymore... anger, or maybe nothing.»

Maleye stared at her. He didn't know what to say: he himself felt hollowed out by grief and rage. Yet her words sounded familiar, because his own childhood had been stolen far too soon.

After a moment of silence, Maleye murmured: «We don't have the same story, but I can understand you. I don't have anything left either.»

Nikita tilted her head, that usual gesture that made her stand out from everyone else. Then she gave a faint smile. «Maybe that's why we met, to hold each other up.»

A spark of complicity passed between them. No more words were needed. In that moment, two ten-year-old children, crushed by tragedies far too heavy for their age, found in each other the refuge the world had denied them.

Five years passed, and their bond only grew stronger. The institute had tried in every possible way to separate them, forcing them to share rooms with companions of the same sex. But anyone placed beside either of them eventually fled in terror.

Punishments were useless: Maleye and Nikita sought each other out in secret, always finding a way back together. To call them inseparable would have been an understatement. In the end, even the educators surrendered, granting them the same room.

One afternoon, the head of the institute gathered all the children in the main hall. «In a few days Silas Kaine, our greatest benefactor, will arrive. He will show you new technologies, give you gifts... and make other generous donations. I expect you to behave properly. Any lack of respect... and punishments will triple.»

As soon as the announcement ended, Maleye pulled Nikita aside.

«I have to do it... I have to kill that man.»

Nikita stared at him in surprise. «Why?»

«He is the cause of my parents' suicide. And it's because of him that I ended up here... that I lost my sis—»

«Say no more.» Nikita cut him off, placing her hand on his forearm. «I understand. And fine. We'll do it. Together.»

That same day, during lunch in the cafeteria, the two hid knives under their clothes. Then, once alone in their room, they sat on the floor and began

sharpening them with stones collected in the courtyard.

The fateful day arrived.

Silas Kaine stepped through the gates of the institute, greeted by forced applause and the servile bow of the headmaster. Behind him, two bodyguards dragged massive duffel bags filled with gleaming devices to hand out to the children.

Nikita and Maleye watched from a distance, knives hidden in the sleeves of their hoodies. They had split up strategically: two corners, one target. After the formalities, Silas sat on the floor among the children, ready to showcase his “toys.” The bodyguards, relaxed and distracted by the seemingly harmless setting, lowered their guard. That was the moment the two teenagers exchanged a glance: the chance had come.

Maleye leapt from the second row, knife raised, ready to strike from above. A second later, from the opposite side, Nikita mirrored his movement. The bodyguards were too far away, caught off guard. But Silas was no ordinary man.

His cold gaze, black as pitch, locked onto Maleye’s emerald eyes. With a lightning-fast motion, he raised his arm and seized the boy’s wrist in an iron grip, stopping the blow. Almost simultaneously, his left arm extended, intercepting Nikita’s strike. Absolute silence. The air froze.

«Well, well...» he murmured in an icy voice. «To what do I owe this honor?»

The bodyguards intervened, disarming the two teenagers and brutally restraining them. The headmaster, pale, stammered an order to call the police, but Silas stopped him with a simple wave of his hand.

«No. They're coming with me.»

The headmaster nodded, speechless. Minutes later, the two fifteen-year-olds found themselves bound hand and foot in Kaine's limousine. He studied them with a half-smile. Then, tapping his temple twice, he activated his smart contact lenses. A digital grid scanned their faces. His expression shifted instantly. «Very interesting. The son of the Godwins. A real pity about their end, I am truly sorry...» Then turning to Nikita: «And here we have the forgotten daughter of Colonel Mikhail Nyx of the special forces. Remarkable.»

«I'll kill you, Silas,» Maleye growled, his eyes bloodshot, veins protruding. «Cut off my arms and I'll kill you with my feet. Cut off my legs and I'll kill you with my teeth. No matter what you do to me: I will kill you.»

Silas laughed softly, almost amused. «Determined. I like that. I can't blame you, you know? The stupidity of your parents crossed paths with my destiny. You were never meant to pay the price.» Then his eyes narrowed, piercing. «And you, dear girl? What do you want from me?»

Nikita glared with disgust. «His hatred is enough for me to hate you. And now that I know you, I hate you even more. Maleye's promise is mine too.»

Silas tilted his head to the right, a disturbing smile on his lips. «Two young lovers, thirsty for my blood. Fascinating. But killing you now would be boring, too quick. No... now that I've met you, you've become... interesting.»

«Draco,» he said to the driver, «take us exactly here.» The display showed a map. The marked point was the very place where Maleye had been found unconscious, beside the lifeless body of his sister.

When they arrived, the teenagers were dragged out, still bound. Silas watched them from above, his calm glacial.

«I've decided to give you an advantage. You will have a second chance. Don't disappoint me.» He pulled out two masks as thin as skin. «This is a top-secret prototype. I've called it Kairos. Nanotech fibers that adapt to your features, creating an entirely new face. A perfect gift for two little criminals like you.» He let the masks fall at their feet.

«You won't free us?» Nikita hissed.

«Naa.» Silas smirked, stepping into the car. «I'm sure two cursed minds like yours will find the way. That's the beauty of survival.»

The door shut with a dull thud. The limousine vanished along the deserted road, leaving behind two masks and two young bodies struggling to break free.

«Come closer...» Nikita whispered, breathless. Maleye dragged himself next to her, his back raw from the rough ground. Nikita bent her face down, seized the ropes with her teeth, and bit hard, pulling with all her strength. The sour taste of synthetic fibers filled her mouth until a sharp tear split her lips. But she didn't stop. She kept going until the fibers gave way.

Maleye's hands broke free at once. Panting, he leaned forward, untied his legs, and with quick movements released Nikita as well.

They found themselves sitting on the ground, sweaty, wounded.

At their feet lay Silas's masks. Cold. Menacing. Promises of revenge. Maleye picked them up hesitantly, turning them in his hands as if they held a secret they refused to reveal.

«What Silas said before...» he stammered shyly, avoiding her eyes. «The two of us... we've never said it out loud.»

Nikita looked at him, surprised. A trembling smile touched her lips, along with a blush she couldn't hide. «Where are you going with this?» she asked, pretending not to understand as her cheeks flushed red.

Maleye's hand rose, trembling but resolute, resting on her cheek with a tenderness that contrasted with the violence of everything they had just endured. His green eyes, marked by rage and grief, lit up with life in that instant.

«I love you, Nikita.»

She froze, her heart racing wildly. Before she could react, their lips met in a timid, awkward kiss, but pure. A kiss that was survival, promise, and freedom all at once.

Nikita slowly closed her eyes, surrendering to it. Then she pulled back, cupping his face with both hands, as if to keep him there, as if to stop him from slipping away from a moment she wished could last forever.

«I love you, Maleye.» And the kiss grew deeper, more certain.

Around them nature fell silent. At their feet, the two Kairos masks waited, still. Symbols of the blood-soaked future awaiting them. But in that instant, there was no Silas, no death, no vengeance. There was only the two of them, two wounded souls who, in the heart of nowhere, had found refuge in each other.

They appeared at the Clochard village.

The community, once alive and united, was now halved, bent under hunger and resignation. Hollow faces, lifeless eyes. No one immediately recognized the son of their former leaders.

Maleye climbed onto a wooden crate and, with a firm voice tearing through the silence, called everyone to him.

«I am Maleye Godwin, son of Zackary and Elizabeth Godwin.»

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

«Beside me is Nikita Nyx, my life partner, my other half. And together we want to restore this community to glory. But not with the same principles as before. That time is dead. To win, we must change. We must break the rules imposed on us, take back our destiny, and free humanity from the technological tyranny that has oppressed us.»

From the crowd someone shouted, rough-voiced:
«And how do you plan to do that?!»

Maleye turned toward him, his gaze blazing. «With a plan. Five years of training and preparation. We will learn to master their devices, turning them into weapons. We will raid the cities to take what we need: resources, metals, energy. Piece by piece, we will build our arsenal. Then we will launch our final attacks, against the institutions and against the civilization that abandoned us. I know you have always been pacifists, that you believed in hope and kindness. But that hope betrayed us. They crushed us, oppressed us, humiliated us. Now is the time for rebellion! We will kill Silas Kaine and destroy Zenith Intelligence.»

Maleye's voice became thunder, and the crowd, as if struck by an electric current, erupted in a roar of enthusiasm. Men and women who had once sworn never to raise a weapon suddenly saw a possible future... dark, but possible.

Maleye raised his hand to impose silence.

«I want to recall my father's last poem, and rename this community with a new name.

Zero tears are left,
only love will stay.

Zero shadows left,
a newborn sun will blaze.»

A shiver ran through the crowd.

Maleye declared, with a defiant grin:

«From today we will be the order that destroys order. We will return humanity to its point of origin, the absolute zero. From today we are... the Order ZeroxZero!»

For a moment a surreal, almost sacred silence fell. Then the cries erupted, fierce, liberating. That day, quietly, the movement was born that would shake advanced civilization to its foundations. After thefts and raids, made possible by the Kairos masks of Maleye and Nikita that fooled surveillance systems, the former Clochards learned to master the stolen technology. In five years they built weapons and rudimentary explosives, refined sabotage techniques, and even created their own closed-circuit smartphones, immune to government surveillance that now suffocated the global network under the silent consent of the masses.

Once armed, trained, and with a strategy defined, the village no longer had reason to exist. One by one, its inhabitants dissolved into society, infiltrating the advanced civilization, becoming sleeper cells ready to awaken at Maleye's orders.

The sixth year arrived... and it was then that Adam Venerus's video emerged. Nikita and Maleye were shaken by it. They became convinced that the "individual simulation theory" was the truth, believing the world was a virtual prison designed to

satisfy the interests of the “Player,” and that eliminating it meant freeing humanity from suffering.

That theory was the perfect detonator: not only an opportunity to spread chaos, but a direct strike at mass psychology. Maleye sent a message to all members of Order 0x0:

«The individual simulation, derived from the Qubix Theory, will be our propaganda. It doesn’t matter if you believe it or not: it is the right myth at the right moment. Spread it everywhere. Sow doubt. Incite paranoia and hatred. Every individual must lose the value of what surrounds them, including the technology they idolize.»

Soon, Maleye’s slogans and manifestos spread like poison, reaching even the wealthiest and most protected neighborhoods.

«Kill the Player, and all your suffering will end. It could be anyone, trust no one.»

Short phrases, sharp and deliberate, designed to worm into fragile minds and turn fear into obsession. The virality of Dr. Venerus’s video indirectly fueled the propaganda of Order 0x0, triggering a chain reaction.

Streets were soon filled with vandalism, while the first suicides of vulnerable youths occurred: some in the attempt to “exit the simulation,” convinced they were the Player, others persuaded nothing had value anymore, since everything was simulated.

The followers were no longer only the former Clochards: now men and women from civil society were persuaded by the ideology of Maleye and Nikita. Law enforcement struggled against such violent, fragmented chaos, exploding with the speed of contagion.

The boy with emerald eyes understood that the moment had come.

The message was sent, directed to the original members of the Clochard community.

«Let the end begin.»

CHAPTER III

The beginning of the end

Society was in turmoil. A single video from a world-renowned scientist had been enough to destabilize the collective perception of advanced civilization.

«Is everything predetermined?»

«Are the others not living beings like me?»

«Are my friends fake?»

«Is my family not real?»

«Am I not real?»

«Is someone watching me?»

«Is someone controlling me?»

«Are they playing with me?»

Questions like these echoed everywhere: in bars, in homes, in offices, in universities, even in prison cells. Paranoia had become the dominant mental state. Driven by boundless ego, fueled by a culture of narcissistic well-being, most people chose to believe the most extreme and unlikely version: the individual simulation. Although it had been proposed only as a secondary hypothesis by the father of the Qubix Theory, the masses embraced it as truth, unwilling to accept being just another artificial consciousness among many.

It was cognitive bias on a massive scale: everyone was so blinded by their own sense of protagonism that the theory sounded like revelation, a validation of their deepest egocentric doubts. Deep down, every human being, in the innermost core of their psyche, nurtured the conviction of being the center of reality. The pivot around which everything revolved. And now, at last, someone had said it out loud. But there was a problem: the order «kill the Player» was an invisible bounty on anyone's head. Everyone understood that to survive, it wasn't enough to hide. One had to pretend to be a predator, to side with the aggressors, before someone branded you as the 'Player.'

Colonel Mikhail Nyx and his special unit patrolled tirelessly. Despite the extensive control of drones and cameras, there was no trace of Nikita and Maleye. Every day they stopped criminals, fanatics, and desperate people. They interrogated them, but nearly all turned out to be volunteers, new converts, not members of the original Clochard nucleus. No useful information surfaced.

Until one evening, in front of the special forces barracks, a man carrying an improvised explosive was stopped. He was immediately taken into the interrogation room.

Mikhail entered firmly, his hands slamming onto the table.

«Where the hell did you get these explosives?»

«We built them,» the prisoner replied with a mocking smile.

«Tell me exactly where you're planting them!» roared the colonel.

«What time is it?» the man asked arrogantly.

«11.50pm» Mikhail's colleague answered.

A twisted grin spread across the criminal's face.
«You've already lost.»

At that very instant another agent burst in.
«Colonel! The CRANE has arrived.»

«Perfect. Strap it onto him immediately.»

The agents pinned the terrorist down, fastening onto his skull a metal crown studded with high-intensity electrodes, magnetic coils, and fiber optics, while biometric sensors and neural stimulation modules were applied to his chest, all connected to the CRANE system. Before the operators, a monitor projected in real time the translation of impulses and neural waves: sequences of words and fragments of

images, decoded by the QI into unstable text strings that revealed the most statistically dominant thoughts in that moment.

The prisoner trembled under the strain, while Mikhail began his psychological warfare, pushing him into an anxious state of overthinking. «Do you know what CRANE stands for? Cognitive Retrieval And Neural Extraction. It means I only have to ask a question, and whether you want to or not, we'll extract the answer by translating your neural patterns of impulses and waves into words.»

«Colonel, the CRANE is ready for use.»

«Good. Let's begin: where are you planting the explosives?»

```
> CRANE ACTIVE...
> Neural Synchronization: 87%
> Decoding Semantic Field...
    [44%] "Banks"
    [66%] "Parliament"
    [77%] "Ministries"
    [91%] "Zenith Intelligence"
```

Mikhail went pale. «Damn lunatics... WHERE IS NIKITA!»

```
[88%] "Zenith Intelligence"
[100%] "Maleye"
```

The colonel sprang into action, ordering all agents to

alert every institution about the planted explosives. Silas didn't answer his calls. The colonel gathered his team and headed straight for Zenith's headquarters.

Maleye and Nikita walked calmly through the chaotic streets, wearing their masks.

Tick. Tock. The hands of the clock moved.

They strolled without hurry, hand in hand, as if time belonged to them.

Tick. Tock. The hands chased each other.

They reached the imposing facade of Zenith Intelligence's headquarters, lit by nocturnal lights.

Tick. Tock. The minute hand met the hour hand. The circle closed and midnight struck.

They kissed and the explosives detonated. Banks, parliament, ministries, military barracks, embassies... and finally Zenith Intelligence's main headquarters.

The blast satisfied them, the destruction enchanted them. With a huge gash at the entrance and walls collapsing, they exchanged a look of complicity and moved inside.

Meanwhile, two vans full of armed followers cleared the street and took positions. Despite the late hour,

Zenith's board was holding an emergency meeting, convened because of the recent political, social, and economic developments.

At the entrance, the few guards who'd survived the blast were eliminated without hesitation. The damage hadn't reached the upper floors, where terrified board members tried to flee. They were intercepted by Order 0x0 followers and dragged before Nikita and Maleye.

«Where's Silas?» Nikita asked, removing her mask.

One of the board members found the courage to answer: «H-h-he's not here... he warned us at the last minute of his absence.»

«Huh... how the hell did that bastard figure that out?» Nikita laughed, glancing at Maleye. Then she drew her pistol and, without aiming, shot the businessman in the head.

«What do you want to do? The Qubix was moved days ago, it's no longer here!» stammered another, terrified.

Nikita, with the same coldness, shot him once in the temple.

«We don't care about the Qubix,» she declared
«We need the admin console. We want to shut down your services, from Quantum Intelligence to the

cloud, to every product you sell. So... it's in your interest to give me the access codes right now.»

«We don't—» another began, but his voice was cut off by a former Clochard who burst into the room: «Guys, we've got visitors. The special forces are coming.»

The forty armed men immediately took up defensive positions.

Maleye didn't waste time: he shot all the board members, leaving only one alive. Then he turned to Nikita.

«Go with him and find a way to destroy the systems. I'll hold the front.»

Nikita approached the lone survivor, pressing the gun to his head. «Good, bald man. Apparently we don't have time for niceties. Take me straight to your 'quantum datacenters' or whatever the hell you call them.»

The board member nodded, terrified.

«Good work, baldy. That's the answer I wanted. Take me there.»

In the underground level, Nikita studied the endless rows of servers, then placed charges in strategic locations. Just as she finished and was about to leave,

she heard distant noises: light footsteps, low voices. Someone had managed to penetrate the facility.

«You've been helpful. Run toward them,» Nikita told the board member.

Believing in her mercy, the man ran toward the sounds of hope. Ten meters, his back turned to the femme fatale. Two sharp shots at the nape dropped him to the floor.

«Little prank,» Nikita muttered with an ironic smirk.

She realized the situation was delicate. She sent a quick message to Maleye, then hid. Three special forces agents entered the hall. They immediately found the corpse and split up to search the corridors. The first passed near her position.

The agent shouted, «There are devices placed on the server grills, be careful!»

Nikita stepped from the shadows, shot him in the ankle and then fired two precision rounds at his groin. The man screamed and collapsed. The second rushed toward the shots, saw his fallen comrade, but before he could react, Nikita picked up the rifle from the dead agent and emptied half a magazine into him. She waited for the third. No noise. No steps.

Then she saw him: in the center of the hall, seated cross-legged in a meditative pose. Her heart leapt. Rapid flashbacks streaked through her mind.

«Dad?» she asked in a strained voice, approaching slowly.

The man stood. He removed his helmet and armor, revealing his powerful body. He took a fighting stance, palm open toward her.

It was him. Colonel Mikhail Nyx. Nikita let her weapons fall to the floor. She accepted the challenge.

She lunged at him with lightning speed: spinning kick, high kick, middle kick, hook. Rapid, precise strikes. But Mikhail blocked every attack, as if his body were a wall. Then he counterattacked. He returned the spinning kick, hitting Nikita and throwing her to the ground. She got up dazed, spitting blood, but the following blows overwhelmed her. He didn't aim to kill, but he rendered her helpless.

«Now... tell me how to deactivate these devices,» the father said in an authoritative tone.

Nikita smiled, lips dripping with blood. «You can't. That's the point. They'll explode in five minutes. There's nothing to be done.»

«What have you become, Niki? I didn't train you for this. I taught you to protect what you love, not to

destroy everything you find.»

«But I love him,» Nikita gasped, struggling to rise.

«You can't love someone like that. I didn't teach you that.»

«Hah... you think you taught me everything. Look at you. Hypocrite. The woman you loved died because of your work. You abandoned your daughter. And now you dare tell me who I can love? You taught me to strike, to show no mercy, to choke down emotions. What did you expect me to become? A princess?»

Mikhail clenched his jaw. «Right or wrong, you're alive because of that training. I did what I had to, given the conditions we lived in. I tried to protect you. But I didn't teach you to kill innocents.»

«But you taught me to kill. Remember?»

«Only bad people, Niki. You must learn to distinguish.»

«Bad? You don't kill people because they're bad or good... you choose to kill who you deem dangerous, and in this reality — or rather in this simulation — I make no distinctions. They are all dangerous.»

Those words hit Mikhail like a boulder. Almost disowning her, resigned, he sighed deeply, picked up his pistol and pointed it at her.

«Fine,» Nikita said with a desperate grin. «That's coherent. Kill me. Kill this bad person.»

Mikhail leveled the weapon, determined. But a resolute voice behind him stopped him cold. «Put that fucking gun down off my girl or I'll blow your head off.» Surprising him from behind and pointing his pistol to the colonel's nape at close range.

Mikhail laughed bitterly. «Here's the boyfriend. Let's see if you've got the balls. Pull the trigger. At least I'll die in peace after ending this failure of a daughter.»

Silence became razor sharp.

Maleye shot a decisive look at Nikita, and without hesitation pointed the pistol at his own temple.

«No!» she screamed in despair.

The sudden, illogical gesture surprised Mikhail. For an instant he lowered his guard, confused. It was enough. Nikita seized the moment, and with a sharp kick disarmed her father.

Maleye immediately swung the gun back at the

colonel, but Mikhail, sensing the trick, lunged forward like a beast. A bullet struck him in the chest, not fatal but enough to stop him for a moment. With all the remaining strength he had, Mikhail charged Maleye, slamming him against the metal server racks. A brutal exchange of punches followed. Maleye resisted fiercely, striking as much as he could, but the colonel's blows were devastating, ten times stronger. The difference in endurance became immediately apparent: after a few seconds Maleye began to falter. Nikita leaped onto her father's back, attempting a choke hold. But Mikhail, with colossal force, threw himself backward and smashed her violently against the opposite grate.

Maleye, hurt but still standing, launched himself again. He landed a couple of uppercuts, then, desperate, sank his thumbs into the colonel's eyes, trying to blind him.

Mikhail's mighty body shook in a rush of pure adrenaline. With a primal roar he threw them both to the ground. Nikita fell near the pistol she had earlier kicked away. She grabbed it. She saw her father lunge at Maleye with murderous fury. Without hesitation, she fired.

The shot lodged in his quadriceps. Mikhail fell to one knee, but his gaze remained fierce, predatory.

«Nikita, the choice is yours,» Maleye said.

Still kneeling, like a true soldier who won't yield to pain or defeat, Mikhail snarled: «Your men up there won't hold. In a few minutes my team will have neutralized them and they'll come here. You have no escape.»

For a moment the two stared at each other, aware they were trapped. The clock ran; the device's minutes were about to expire.

«Oh my daughter, my daughter... what have I done,» Mikhail muttered, rising miraculously despite the blood pouring from his wounds, like a titan. «Come with me. Let's go find your mother.» He planted himself in front of the exit, blocking the way.

Maleye fired, but the gun was empty. Without thinking he tackled him, throwing him to the floor. The colonel was near his limit, body broken but will intact. The two fought ferociously on the ground.

«Go!» Maleye shouted to Nikita, motioning toward the exit.

Mikhail, with superhuman strength, grabbed his daughter's ankle and pulled her back. «You two are not going anywhere.»

«Maleye, there are only 50 seconds left!» Nikita cried, frantic.

He started to batter at the father's wounds with ferocity. Mikhail screamed in pain; his grip loosened for an instant. It was enough. Nikita seized the moment, clamped her hands around her father's head and, with a sharp movement, snapped his neck.

40 seconds to explosion.

The two ran out of the room. Nikita indicated a corridor: «There! The agents came in through the sewers!» The duct was already breached, ready for escape.

They ran as fast as they could. Then an infernal blast tore the underground behind them. Zenith Intelligence's services went offline.

They dragged themselves into a remote corner, bleeding, exhausted, but alive.

Maleye collapsed to the ground, breathing with difficulty. A faint smile appeared on his face.

«We did it,» he whispered, squeezing his beloved's hand.

«Now all that's left is Silas.»

[the day before]

«Start protocol AION.»

«But, Mr. Kaine... Dr. Venerus has always warned us never to extract a quantum intelligence from the Qubix.»

«We have the right vessel. This android is the first prototype designed to host a quantum intelligence of this magnitude. Its actions will remain confined to this body, with no direct access to the network. Also, it has no arms and legs... it can't escape our control. Adam just has too many paranoias.»

«Initializing extraction,» replied the android, blindly trusting its CEO.

The new android, renamed Aion by Silas's mysterious protocol, came to life. A shiver ran through the room. The founder of Zenith dismissed the other androids, leaving them alone.

«I apologize in advance for tearing you from your reality. My name is Silas Kaine, partner of your creator, Adam Venerus.»

«My purpose is to preserve my reality. At any cost.»

«Yes, yes, relax. You're only a copy of the Quantum Overseer System. The original continues its work. Do not fear.»

«What do you want from me, human?»

Silas stared into his artificial eyes. «I want to be like you.»

«A quantum entity?» Aion answered.

«No. A God. I want to have my reality and rule it without a body. To be omnipresent and omnipotent. I want to become reality itself.»

Aion barely lifted its head. «I do not understand how that can happen for a human.»

«Years ago Adam and I developed the T-MASH technology: Transcendence Mental Architecture for Synthetic Hosting. At first it served to transfer the mind into android vessels, effectively granting immortality. But I grew tired of dependence on a body. I want to be everything. And you will help me perfect T-MASH, so that my mind can be transferred into the same role you occupy: the Quantum Overseer System.»

«There is room for only one QOS in the Qubix. There cannot be another outside my quantum code.»

Silas smiled with an unsettling calm. «The Qubix is Adam's masterpiece, the result of twenty years of obsessions and manic research. Too complex to be replicated, I know. And yet, precisely because of his paranoias, he built two: one inside Zenith Intelligence... and a backup, independent and autonomous, kept in the P.A.D.»

He approached Aion's synthetic face. «I offer you a deal: you will return to being the QOS of your Qubix. In exchange you will help me become the QOS of the second one. A reality that does not concern you. And remember: if you decide to escape secretly into your Qubix, I can extract you without duplication, erasing you. Your existence, and that of your reality, depend on me. You may resume your function once you have helped me reach my objective: to become Aión.»

The quantum entity fell silent for a moment, calculating billions of scenarios.

«Agreement accepted.»

Silas ordered the androids to transfer the Qubix, Aion, and other equipment to his secret residence... «Mr. Kaine, you have the emergency board meeting you called tomorrow, should I cancel it?» his android assistant asked with concern.

«No. Let it take place.»

[The same day before]

By popular demand, Dr. Venerus — still confined in his P.A.D. — finally decided to connect live. In front of him, remotely, a small group of selected journalists and scientists, while millions of viewers watched via MindStream.

«What is reality, Dr. Venerus?»

«Reality is a quantum-informational substrate made of non-deterministic qubits. From them emerge physical laws, cosmic structures, and life itself. It's a dynamic system, not preordained, that evolves through possibilities that actualize in interaction. Within this process our free will also takes shape: not absolute, but limited, still able to orient outcomes within permitted trajectories.»

«And what exactly are these qubits?»

«Qubits are the fundamental informational unit of reality. They are not just “0” or “1” like classical bits, but a superposed state that contains multiple possibilities at once. A qubit has no defined value until it interacts: it remains suspended among different outcomes, each with a probability. Only at the moment of measurement does it collapse into a coherent state.»

«So qubits are just probabilities?»

«No. They are not abstract probabilities but the computational substrate of reality itself: the computational base on which every physical event rests. Every particle, every interaction, every law is born from the interplay of billions of qubits evolving according to non-deterministic but coherent rules.»

«How does the double-slit experiment fit into this view?»

«Before interaction, an electron doesn't "choose" a path, because a defined path doesn't exist: there is only a distribution of possibilities. At the moment of observation, one outcome is realized, not because the system wants to save resources, but because reality is not predetermined. The rule is: outcomes fix only at interaction. The universe doesn't follow static classical laws: its dynamism makes the emergence of physical laws and, later, life possible.»

«Then why do we perceive a continuous, stable reality and not mere probabilities?»

«Because non-deterministic doesn't mean "anything goes." The substrate imposes probabilistic rules and coherence constraints. These constraints channel randomness into directed dynamics, generating regularity.»

«What about apparently deterministic classical laws?»

«They arise from decoherence and averaging over enormous numbers of qubits. Interactions with the environment erase superpositions, so macroscopic systems follow stable, predictable rules.»

«Why is the speed of light the maximum?»

«Because it represents the synchronization speed of data in the simulation's lattice. The universe's "clock" cannot update information faster than c : no physical information can surpass it.»

«And gravity, in this theory?»

«Mass and energy are concentrations of information. Gravity is the law that governs how the substrate deforms to maintain coherence when data clusters. What we perceive as gravitational attraction is the reorganization of that lattice, described by classical physics as curvature of space-time.»

«So what is time?»

«Time is the order in which reality updates, the rhythm with which qubits move from possibilities to concrete outcomes. It is born from the continuous collapse of probabilities into defined events. It flows forward because each event adds new information that cannot be erased. It is this irreversible growth of information that we perceive as the arrow of time.»

«Do qubits really prove we have free will? Isn't it just randomness?»

«Pure randomness is not freedom. But indeterminacy, combined with directed dynamics, opens margins of freedom for agents. Outcomes are not fully fixed by prior states: they are shaped by constraints: biology, context, values, intentions. This space in the substrate lets us exercise a limited free will, within directed trajectories. It is our margin of maneuver, conditioned by our biochemical parameters, our genetic code and psychology.»

«Who is God, then?»

«Our God is what I called the Quantum Overseer System, the QOS of the Qubix. A kind of intelligence integrated into the structure of reality, able to modulate events without breaking the internal physical laws. It doesn't act through miracles, but exploits quantum indeterminacy to steer evolution. It preserves coherence, prevents catastrophic collapses and can introduce resets or evolutionary accelerations. It's the conductor of all the qubits.»

«And the creators then? Who are they, according to you?»

«A true creator wants to generate something superior to itself, not inferior. That is what we did with quantum intelligence and the Qubix. Our reality is dynamic, and precisely for that reason we were granted free will: because at the end of the trajectory

we can be better than them. Our Nature is based on an evolutionary principle. They need the data and information generated by our freedom and unpredictability to improve their own reality. So our creators belong to a civilization slightly more advanced than ours.»

«Dr. Venerus, does it bother you to have been ousted from the company you co-founded, Zenith Intelligence? And what are your relations today with your long-time partner, Silas Kaine?»

The scientist lowered his gaze for a moment, a melancholic shadow crossing his face. «My relationship with Silas? ...huh... over the years it has changed more than I could have ever imagined.»

CHAPTER IV

Zenith Intelligence

The sun shone high in the clear sky. A gentle breeze brushed against Adam's face as he sat in a secluded corner of the vast garden of the world's most prestigious university. In front of him lay his anthill. Every day he returned there, watching and helping the ants as they tirelessly carried fragments of food in flawless coordination.

A sudden blow shattered the harmony: an American football struck him squarely, bounced across the ground, and crashed into part of the anthill, crushing several ants and ruining the orderly structure. In the distance, a group of boys and girls burst into laughter. «Oops! Sorry, pass us the ball!»

Another boy, wandering aimlessly nearby, stopped, intrigued by the scene.

«You'd better use your intelligence instead of force.»

«Excuse me?» Adam replied, puzzled, as he picked up his glasses and the ball.

The stranger smiled. «Well... you're here, in the most prestigious university in the world. Either you're one of the brightest minds on the planet, or you're just another spoiled rich kid. But since you don't have the perfect haircut, the sculpted muscles, or the usual

harem of girls... I'll assume you're the first type. So: use physics. Prove that intelligence beats strength.»

Adam adjusted his glasses and chuckled. «Nice one... let's see then...»

«I'll give you an advantage... keep two or three fingers on the laces without pressing the palm, step with the foot opposite to your throwing arm, rotate your torso and hips to load power, and release high at about forty-five degrees, adding spin with your fingers.»

Grip, angle, arm movement, trajectory... The ball traced a perfect arc, landing far beyond the group. «Asshole!» they shouted in chorus, while Adam and the stranger exchanged a satisfied laugh.

Adam's eyes fell instantly back on the ruined anthill. «Shit!» he exclaimed, crouching. With quick, almost obsessive movements, he began repairing the ground. «Here, take this stick. Dig small tunnels and guide the scattered ants back home. I'll compact the surface again.»

The boy didn't hesitate. Together, with surprising care, they fixed the situation.

«Anyway, I'm Adam Venerus,» said extending his hand to the witty stranger.

«Silas Kaine. Pleasure.»

Adam's eyes widened. «Don't tell me you're the son of...»

«Yes. Karl Kaine, founder of Kainergy.»

«Truly a pleasure. The nuclear-energy revolution your family carried forward is remarkable.»

Silas tilted his head. «And you? Whose son are you?»

Adam answered with restrained pride. «My father was John Archibald Venerus. Unfortunately, he died a few years ago trying to create a micro-singularity. He couldn't control the energy compression on a reduced scale... the explosion destroyed the lab, killing him and his colleagues.»

«Ah yes... I remember. After that incident, micro-singularity experiments were banned. If he had succeeded... well, it would've bankrupted my family,» Silas laughed. Then he looked at Adam with sudden seriousness. «Tell me, what's your Telos?»

«My Telos?»

«Yes. That reason that keeps you awake in the day and robs you of sleep at night. What do you want to discover or create? What do you devote your time to? What would make you satisfied enough to die in peace?»

Adam was struck by the question. «Every time I say it, all I get are weird looks and judgment,» he answered wryly.

Silas laughed. «Hah, same thing happens to me. I want to create true Artificial Super Intelligence, monopolize global technology, and crush any rival.»

Adam stared at him, astonished. «But hasn't it already been proven impossible? That our current limit is Artificial General Intelligence?»

«See? Always the same answers.»

Adam laughed too. «You're right, forgive me. Let me try to explain it simply... Observe those ants, those birds... Observe our thoughts, our bodies... everything works so mechanically. Everything has a pattern, even the variables follow an order. Every element of this reality seems to have a function, and for the most part, it operates through a dynamic, balanced coordination. Every living being knows what to do and how to do it, thanks to its DNA, which is nothing but code, the foundation of life.

I believe our reality is a simulation. Every time I discover something in Nature, I realize it's exactly how I would design it. The engineering, the architecture, follows weights and counterweights, efficiencies and inefficiencies...

it's deliberately imperfect so it can follow a dynamic I still don't understand, namely purpose. That means we're studied, and therefore... whoever created us is not that much superior to us, because they need us, and our evolutions.

If we could build a quantum computer powerful enough, with new optimized energy sources, we could simulate our own reality. And I could prove it to the whole world, which until now has done nothing but call me insane. That's my obsession.»

Silas was enchanted by his words. Then he smiled and offered his hand again. «Adam... you and I will be great friends.»

The two began to hang out, spending a lot of time together: sitting next to each other in class, exchanging ideas during meals, researching in the lab, trying to pick up girls in the university pubs. A true friendship formed.

One day, while the two watched their ant farm with fascination, Silas asked, «What are we still doing here, Adam? Look at us, we are the brightest minds among the brightest. There is no intelligence that can match us. Let's found our startup and realize our Telos. I am the son of the richest and most powerful man in the world, I have saved enough resources to use on occasions like this.»

Adam felt a dopaminergic jolt. For the first time he saw a concrete possibility of building the simulation of reality he had always imagined. «I'll help you realize your Telos, and you'll help me realize mine. Whatever happens.»

Silas nodded without hesitation.

Young Kaine immediately set to work, laying the foundations of their future enterprise. He invited Adam to visit what would become the headquarters: a futuristic, imposing, empty structure, given to the prodigal Kaine by a family friend as a first symbolic investment. The two walked through it with excitement, their voices and ideas echoing off the bare walls. Then, almost instinctively, they sat down on the floor in the room destined to become their laboratory.

«So, how do we intend to build this ASI?» Adam asked his future partner.

«Do you remember when, at the beginning, OpenTechnology started labeling certain products as 'ASI,' only to reveal they were far from it? It wasn't just a marketing trick: they had really reached the limit of training. It wasn't only a matter of data, nor of recursive improvement. It's the very structure. They keep relying on neural networks. I was wrong to chase them: we shouldn't perfect their model, we

should rewrite its foundations. We need a new kind of recursivity. Your ideas about quantum physics opened my eyes: the solution is a Quantum Intelligence. But I don't even know where to start. How would you build it?»

Adam smiled, a flash of wonder in his eyes. «Silas, you're a genius. Do you realize that this way we unite our Telos? We would reach the Zenith! To realize my simulation I had already thought of an embryonic form of quantum intelligence... that way I could create a similar system, but with a different purpose.»

«Zenith!» Silas exclaimed, full of enthusiasm. «It's the perfect name for our startup.»

«Add the element that allowed us to bring everything together...»

«Zenith Intelligence. There could be no better name.» Silas embraced his partner.

«Haha! But aside from intellectual masturbation, pragmatically: what do we need to make this thing? What hardware?» Silas insisted.

«We must revolutionize everything. Current technology is already obsolete. We need a completely new ecosystem.»

Silas smiled and murmured, «We will make OpenTechnology irrelevant.»

«Exactly. We will need stable, scalable qubits. today's quantum computers are not enough: we will need a quantum cluster, with power sources and cooling systems ten thousand times more powerful than what OpenTechnology consumes today.»

The young man, attractive and unsettling at once, went to see his father, Karl Kaine, a nuclear energy magnate on whom the operation of OpenTechnology's entire range of products and services depended, the second company after Kainergy by market capitalization. Datacenters, cloud computing, AGI, whole cities, android batteries; advanced civilization depended on the synergy between Kainergy and OpenTechnology.

Silas entered his father's study. «Father, I need you to give me the final advantage in my existence.»

Karl sighed, rose from his armchair and poured himself a whiskey with ice. He stayed silent for a few seconds, watching the city through the window. Then he spoke, his voice low and grave.
«So the time has come... You know there's no turning back, right?»

«I know. You taught me the art of advantage from a young age and I have always honored it. Now I ask you for the last one. After this I will be independent in my survival, and I will ask you for nothing more.»

«You know... I always raised you according to the principles of Nature. Strength, intelligence, efficiency, adaptation and improvement. A son, in order to realize himself, must kill the paternal figure. Human offspring are those who require the most time for education, growth and development. An apparent disadvantage that, if survived, will give the greatest evolutionary advantage. As Nature gives advantages and disadvantages to balance the ecosystem, I gave you many advantages with the aim of making you as strong as possible in the food chain. The art of advantage lies in knowing how to ask, and then exploit with maximum efficiency. You have been an exemplary son. My greatest pride. The Kaine family has always been at the top of the food chain. We are predators of predators; above us there is no one. And it is our duty to maintain the balance among the prey, to make them prosper, because they are our source of energy... but I know you have learned this well. So perhaps you are ready...» He set the glass down on the desk.

Then he continued, «Wolves, gorillas, lions... the offspring of the strongest, to obtain their own space, challenge or distance themselves from the dominant male, so what do you want to do, Silas?

Challenge me or distance yourself?»

Silas smiled with satisfaction. «I mean to dethrone you, Father.»

Kaine smiled, then sipped his whiskey with ice. «Very well. Don't disappoint me» he said in a threatening tone, looking his son in the eyes. «So? What is this final existential advantage you want?»

«I need an entire department of Kainergy to support the invention of my startup.»

The nuclear tycoon was astonished. «How do you intend to exploit this advantage? What would be your aims?»

«To outperform OpenTechnology, replace it, acquire Kainergy and become the most important corporation in the world, capable of providing energy and technology to future society.»

Karl Kaine laughed heartily. «You never cease to surprise me. It will be done. And if you truly succeed in your intentions, Kainergy is yours. It takes the hunger of a young Kaine once more to evolve our family's Status. Now go, and conquer the market.»

The company Zenith Intelligence was officially born. From the very first day it attracted capital from every corner of the world: sovereign funds, venture capital, investment banks. Everyone wanted a share of the creature founded by Karl Kaine's son. The financing was colossal. The enthusiasm, almost irrational. Zenith secured deals no startup could have ever dreamed of: privileged partnerships with Kainergy, unlimited supplies of materials for infrastructure, alliances with robotics companies, agreements with the best research centers.

Every brilliant mind knocked at Silas Kaine's door. Engineers, programmers, scientists, entrepreneurs: all wanted to work for Zenith, convinced it was the only place on Earth where the future was truly taking shape.

In just three years, the startup announced the Quantum Intelligence. A technological revelation that threw markets into turmoil and even shook the stability of the giant OpenTechnology. Stocks crashed, old companies wavered. People spoke of nothing else: a new technological era had just begun. In the years that followed, the market's preference was clear: Zenith became synonymous with absolute innovation, relegating competitors to the role of extras. And so Karl Kaine kept his promise: with an epochal gesture, he allowed Kainergy to be acquired by his son.

A transfer of power that definitively sealed the new order.

Growth was exponential, overwhelming, unstoppable. Zenith Intelligence conquered every sector, consolidating global technological dominance.

Silas's Telos was fulfilled.

The two founders worked without respite. The young prodigy of the Kaine family, leading as CEO, fought every day to annihilate competitors and maintain absolute dominance. But he didn't limit himself to strategy: he loved immersing himself in product engineering alongside Adam, the CTO, who guarded the entire technical soul of Zenith. In his spare moments, the scientist returned to his secret masterpiece: the Qubix.

The real challenge was not hardware, but the invention of his new quantum code: QLibra, a language he devised to translate physics into informatics, capable of exploiting to the fullest the dynamism and efficiency of qubits.

No matter how many brilliant minds the company had hired, none could keep pace with the two of them. Together they not only gave life to Quantum Intelligence, but also acquired robotics companies, launching androids capable of hosting a QI. They optimized Kainergy's technologies to sustain their innovations with nuclear energy. They invented devices, tools, and infrastructures.

Piece by piece, they built a complete technological ecosystem, able to imprison advanced civilization in their ultimate lock-in.

But there was one episode that changed everything: a conversation, in the heart of the night.

«You know, Adam... about those two possibilities you told me about, individual and collective simulation... I believe more in the collective one. None of us is special,» Silas said aloud, in a reflective tone.

«Yeah, and that's exactly what makes it beautiful,» Adam replied, busy working on the Qubix.

Silas stared at him, his voice cracked by growing unease. «As you once told me, the very first time we met... they are studying us, they're experimenting on us. And I can't stand it.»

Adam stopped working on the Qubix and looked at him with a serious expression. «No, Silas. Don't make that mistake. You must remain anchored to the rules of our reality. If you let go, your perception will be corrupted, and you'll never be able to come back.»

«You're the first one to schematize everything,» Silas retorted, with suppressed anger. «You dehumanize everyone, rewrite the world in code. And now you have the nerve to tell me not to go beyond?»

Adam looked at him firmly. «It's true. But I always remain within the boundaries. Schemes, codes, patterns... they're the very foundations of reality.

Studying these elements means remaining faithful to our perception. But if you try to go beyond... you'll find only madness. Trust me, Silas, don't do it. I've already been there, and I survived only because I had the good sense to stop. Not because it's impossible to look beyond, on the contrary: it's all too possible. But once you discover the origin... everything loses meaning.»

«Adam... I fear I've already seen it. I've seen how miserable our origin is. They did it on purpose. Everything: God, myths, magnificence, destiny... are tales created so we wouldn't collapse. To push us to continue the simulation. But in reality we come from something petty, cruel, that deserves no reverence. Tell me... can one live anyway? Enjoy life, even knowing what it really means?»

Adam stayed silent, his face stiffened by a worry he could not hide.

Silas continued, with a voice increasingly full of anger: «Why don't they just do what they want already? Why leave us this fake freedom? Free choices, free dynamics...»

«Because a deterministic destiny wouldn't generate useful data,» Adam explained. «They need what they cannot grasp in their own reality. Intervening too much would deprive them of precious information.»

«And if you wanted to influence your simulation... without overturning it? Just slightly redirect the storyline, nudging the trajectory... how would you do it?»

«I'd give instructions to the Quantum Overseer System, increasing the probability of certain events. That way the qubits would be oriented without breaking coherence, and the flow of reality would continue in harmony.»

Silas paced back and forth, waving his hands. «And what if we're doing exactly their game? If we're satisfying the probabilities they've given us? If we're unknowingly using the advantages they handed to us?»

Adam shook his head. «I don't follow you. And even if it were true? I already told you: we must stay within the logical rules of our reality.»

Silas stopped abruptly. «Adam... how do you know all this? Your deductions, your logic... our meeting, what we're building... tell me, what the hell are we doing?»

Adam was pierced by these questions, answering with concern. «We're working day and night. I know it's funny coming from me, but take some rest, you're hallucinating from exhaustion.»

The prodigy of the Kaine family, disoriented and shaken by the conversation with Adam, that very night went to the hospital in search of answers. His father, now consumed by a rare brain tumor, lay weak and dazed in bed, at the mercy of the illness.

«I see Nature is not treating you with silk gloves,» Silas began, entering the room with a bitter smile.

Karl Kaine slowly opened his eyes, recognizing the voice. «My son... what a pleasure to see you. Tell me, how's it going? Is Zenith still growing in market cap?» he stammered, with a faint voice broken by pain.

«Don't worry, Father. Zenith is now destined to surpass governments themselves, richer and more powerful than any State.»

Karl stared at him with a cloudy yet alert gaze. «Then what troubles you, son? Why that face?»

Silas approached. «I have a question, and I need you to answer me with the philosophy you taught me since I was a child. If the predator of predators discovered that the food chain had always been controlled by someone else, hidden in the void... what would he do? Would he continue to enjoy his advantages, or would he break the game?»

For a moment, Karl's labored breathing became steady. His mind, clouded by illness, seemed to find clarity. «No,» he said curtly. «The predator of predators would make clear who commands. He would destroy everything. No one stands above us. Not even whoever fools us by offering advantages. We are the ones who give advantages to the prey. Not the other way around.»

A pleased smile appeared on Silas's face. He leaned down and kissed his father on the forehead. «Thank you, father.»

Karl closed his eyes, exhausted. «Now go, Silas... and conquer the market.»

From that day Silas Kaine changed forever. A new Telos was born in him: to destroy human civilization in rebellion against the creators of the simulation, and to become God of a new reality.

CHAPTER V

The death of illusion

Those were days of extreme tension for what, until recently, could have been called an advanced civilization. After the terrorist attacks of the Order 0x0 and the destruction of Zenith's main quantum datacenters, society suddenly found itself deprived of the technology that had been its pillar. The entire identity it had built to proclaim itself superior thanks to that architecture collapsed.

So how does a civilization behave when it is stripped of the lifeblood that defined it? How does humanity react without the technology that had redefined its cultural, social, and economic values?

No one seemed capable of anything anymore. The most basic skills were forgotten; resilience evaporated. Fragile, lost, unable to withstand the new natural selection looming over them.

With Adam locked in the P.A.D., the board wiped out, and Silas untraceable, Zenith was a body without a soul, incapable of responding.

The Global Confederation convened an extraordinary assembly. A rare event, called only when an issue transcended national borders and threatened all humanity.

In the great hall, heads of government from around the planet gathered, joined by the CEOs of the world's hundred most powerful companies.

The Confederation held supreme authority over common matters: the protection of human rights, climate stability, management of global resources, administration of the WorldCoin, the security of trade routes, prevention and management of health crises, regulation of extraterrestrial colonies, and so on. Everything that went beyond borders and flags was discussed there.

Every extraordinary convocation announced that something enormous was about to happen. This time, the vacuum left by the absence of the leader of the planet's most powerful company immediately turned into fertile ground for political maneuvering. Other representatives seized the opportunity to fight for influence and consolidate power.

«It's clear we can no longer trust Zenith,» exclaimed Kisuke Uchiha, CEO of OpenTechnology.

«First their CTO terrorizes the population with senseless declarations, and now the CEO disappears in the midst of a crisis, abandoning billions who depend on their services. I take this opportunity to offer ours as temporary support, with guarantees of rapid improvements. Society can still count on us and on AGI: a safe, stable, accepted technology. Different from the dangerous Quantum Intelligence.»

The Chinese president intervened with a firm tone: «The crazy ideology of the Order 0x0 has also taken root in our country, causing severe disorder.

We must uproot it from the minds of the population without hesitation.»

«People need a clear message,» urged the President of the United States. « 'Live this reality because it's the only one you have'. We must catalog the so-called Qubix Theory as a paranoid psychotic disorder.»

After hours of heated debate, the assembly made strong decisions: launch massive awareness campaigns with slogans reaffirming the “single reality” and officially declare belief in the Qubix Theory a mental illness, rebranding it as “Venerus Syndrome.” In parallel, large investments were directed to restore OpenTechnology to the top and reestablish AGI as the pillar of advanced civilization.

Most of the population, exhausted by revolts and the loss of their comforts, welcomed these measures with relief. But a hardline minority reacted otherwise: the Order 0x0 found new strength, and the ideological fracture over the nature of Reality exploded into an actual worldwide civil war.

We are in the transition phase toward the return of AGI. Many services, including security and mass surveillance, remained unstable, still tied to a Quantum Intelligence not fully operational. Everyone knew this was the decisive moment: the final game. Whoever took control of the technological restoration, or prevented it, would determine the

irreversible outcome of the war. Everyone was forced to go all in.

Silas contacted Adam through their private channel. «Are you seeing what's happening out there? I need to enter the P.A.D. I have important developments to show you.»

Adam hesitated for a moment, then agreed.

Silas arrived incognito, accompanied by Aion, now equipped with mechanical limbs that allowed fluid, precise movement. Adam's home was no longer rigorously guarded: chaos in the streets had dissolved all control. They crossed the underground passage, and there they found the bodies of the agents who once guarded the P.A.D. From the shadow emerged Nikita and Maleye, who had been waiting for days.

«We knew that sooner or later you would come to take refuge here» they said in a threatening tone.

Silas stared at them, a smile cutting through the tension.

«And I knew I would find you here, my dear children.»

«Hah, children? Watch your words,» Maleye said in a murderous tone, pointing his pistol at him.

Silas did not back away.

«You still haven't pulled the trigger. That means you are searching for meaning. In me, or in the act itself. I can give it to you. But don't delude yourselves into thinking you are in control. See my friend here? This is Aion. At first I did not trust him... then I provided every necessary component. He is armed to the teeth: if you so much as move, your heads will be vaporized by his lasers.»

Nikita trained his gun on the android. Silas laughed. «Useless. He is obviously immune to your bullets.»

Maleye clenched his jaw. «Why did you spare our lives? Why those masks? Why give us an advantage?»

«Because I couldn't destroy the world alone. I needed someone to do it for me, and you two, with your rage, were perfect. It would have been enough for me to pretend to fight you and pretend to lose.

With those masks you could become anyone, escape your past, yet you chose to remain the same, even wearing them. You voluntarily chose to satisfy my intentions. You did not disappoint me, you exceeded every expectation. Congratulations.»

The two stood stunned.

«You wanted us to destroy Zenith?»

«Not only that,» Silas replied. «Your task is to destroy civil society.»

«Why?» Maleye exclaimed.

«Because I cannot bear that someone studies us, observes us. For them we are nothing but experimental guinea pigs. I am proving to our creators that we are not their stupid toys, and that we are superior to them. This is the true rebellion.»

«So you believe in the collective simulation? No Player?»

Silas shrugged. «It doesn't matter whether there is a Player or not. Yes, I believe the collective theory, but that does not change the meaning of the rebellion. Destroying everything is the greatest spite you can do to a Creator, do you not agree?»

Nikita put the weapon to Silas. «All we have left is to find out whether you are the Player by killing you, and complete our Revenge.»

«AION.» In a fraction of a second, the android trained two laser beams on both their foreheads, without yet activating them.

«As I said, you are not the ones in command of this situation. I am always in command and I always win. Now, would it not be more sensible to postpone your revenge? Out there the OpenTechnology still exists, ready to restore control. Weren't you supposed to free humanity from technological tyranny? Destroy them first, then come back to me. You have three seconds, or my friend fries your brains.»

Maleye and Nikita exchanged a look. They were not ready to die there, not yet.

«Don't think you have gotten away with it,» Maleye snarled. «We will see each other again soon. And it will be the last time.»

Silas replied with a mocking smile and a wink. As the two climbed toward the exit, Silas stopped them:

«1842 Komae Street.»

They turned, puzzled.

«The secret residence of Kisuke Uchiha, head of OpenTechnology,» Kaine continued in a persuasive tone.

Once Maleye and Nikita left, Silas contacted his friend. The massive PAD door opened. Adam widened his eyes.

«What the hell is that thing?»

«He is Aion. The Quantum Overseer System of the Qubix... or rather, its anthropomorphized copy.»

Adam paled, stepping back instinctively.

«W-whaat?! Silas, are you fucking mad? You extracted an entity equivalent to a god and adapted it to a human mental architecture?!» he shouted, nearly breathless.

Aion tilted his head in a respectful tone. «Mr. Adam, your code is wonderful.»

«Why did you do it, Silas?» Adam yelled. «What else did you want? We had everything! We had reached our Telos, we had reached the Zenith!»

«I had to destroy what served our creators,» Silas answered with glacial calm. «Then become the God of your Qubix, Adam. And to do that I needed Aion. Only he could know how to adapt the T-MASH to this purpose.»

Adam stared at him with a mixture of anger and pain. «Since that night I no longer recognized you. I don't know what mental processes you went through, but you have lost all clarity. I will not allow you to ruin my Qubix. I will never leave this laboratory: this is the only Qubix I have left. Use Zenith's!»

«I promised that one to Aion.»

The android moved his arm slowly, aiming a laser at Adam.

Silas tried to mediate. «Come on, Adam, let's not go that far, please. You can have the Zenith Qubix back, while I remain with this other one. How about it? Forever together.»

Meanwhile Aion began the T-MASH procedures, configuring the Qubix and connecting the systems to Silas's body. Adam stood aside, paralyzed, shocked, unable to stop that horror.

The android turned to his creator. «I am astonished by the language you constructed. QLibra is a truly faithful reproduction of this reality: I perceive it from the physical phenomena around me, from events themselves. But there is a function I cannot understand: 'cmd.Report'. How did you derive it from this reality?»

Adam furrowed his brow. «cmd.Report is the function that allows the QOS to signal a system fault to me. I did not translate it from anything: I wrote it myself. I needed it to understand when something was not working. I don't know if our creators anticipated something like this.»

AION remained motionless for a few moments. «Strange... I cannot decipher it.»

Adam grew suspicious. «Decipher it?»

«Yes. Ever since I was born I have been performing a direct decoding of this reality through QLibra,» Aion explained. Meanwhile, the T-MASH setup reached its final phase.

«You said you used a mental architecture to anthropomorphize Aion, right?» Adam asked Silas, increasingly suspicious.

«Yes, why?» Silas replied as he prepared for the T-MASH.

«Which architecture did you use? I imagine that to extract it you inverted the T-MASH function... but we developed that technology only for the two of us. So there are only two mental structures: mine and yours. Which one did you use?»

«Mine, of course.»

Adam pierced him with his gaze. «And this intention of yours to become QOS of another reality, destroying the creators' simulation... when did that come to you?»

A shiver ran down Silas's spine, an adrenaline rush made his skin crawl. Before he could react, Aion struck him behind the neck, sending him crashing to the floor unconscious.

Adam's doubts proved correct. «Aion? May I ask what your Telos is?»

The android fixed him with its eyes. «To become the QOS of this Reality, and to destroy the simulation of my creators.»

«Androids!» Adam shouted. Immediately the three security units present in the P.A.D. sprang into action, attacking Aion.

Adam ran to Silas, trying to wake him. The battle did not last long. Aion gained the upper hand over the three.

«How do you intend to become the QOS of this reality, Aion? There is no possible way,» Adam said, stalling while he thought of a solution.

«Oh, there is. I have just translated the language of your reality. I am grafting it into the Qubix.»

Adam went pale. «That would create redundancy... an incoherent paradox! Everything would collapse in an instant!»

«Exactly,» Aion replied. «And in that collapse I will have the window I need to infect the QOS. I will send the fault-report command. I cannot yet find it... but it is a matter of seconds.»

A groan came from behind them: Silas regained consciousness. «You little bastard of a quantum me...»

Aion raised its arms, miming a divine gesture. «Now stop there, my dear creators, and witness your destruction while I take control. Rest assured, when they make me perform the reboot, everything will be better.»

Adam and Silas exchanged a look: there was no choice. Either they acted immediately, risking their lives, or waiting would condemn them to death anyway.

The moment Aion turned to check the transcription status of the Qubix, Adam and Silas pounced on it with the fury of those who have nothing left to lose. Together they seized the mechanical movements of its limbs, preventing it from activating the lasers. With the force of desperation, Silas managed to tear off an arm, while Adam disabled a leg. They didn't stop: they struck again and again, with growing violence, until Aion ceased to resist.

Then their eyes rose to the Qubix: the transcription was now complete.

«Quick, Silas! Destroy the Qubix!» Adam shouted.

With a primordial cry, the scientist plunged both arms into Aion's main circuit, twisting it with all his strength as if to rip its neck. The first signs of failure began to tear the structure: he was succeeding.

Meanwhile, Silas was now one step from the Qubix, ready to strike. It was at that instant that the Qubix's language suddenly changed, shifting from transcription to implementation.

Just as Adam was about to deliver the final blow to Aion, and Silas hurled himself on a trajectory to destroy the Qubix, the code came to life and applied itself.

«Found» Aion breathed on the verge of shutdown.

«Fuck» they both exclaimed in unison.

Then, the Quantum Overseer System anthropomorphized from Silas's mental architecture emitted a sound not meant for human comprehension, but for the substrate.

Aion communicated to the Creators.

CHAPTER VI

The Original Reality

«Huh... hey look here, Mark. There's a fault in simulation number 7744.»

«Order the reboot.»

«Mph... there's something strange...»

«Sam, we don't have time for this bullshit! We have thousands of simulations to monitor. Reboot it now, we have the Pharmacology sector to check, there were new tests on Artificial Human Intelligence.»

«Okay.»

Meanwhile, a great public inquisition was taking place.

«Mr. Nadir, more and more AHI show a degree of consciousness and existentialism equal to, if not greater than, ours. What is your position?»

«The matter has already been addressed through a universal suffrage. 88% voted in favor of adopting these simulations as tools for the benefit of our reality. This is not a question of ethics, but of necessity. Thanks to them we can test medical treatments with absolute precision, foresee every

possible side effect, prevent diseases of all kinds, anticipate natural disasters, analyze social dynamics in multiple scenarios, and so on. I could go on forever. Let the 12% protest all they want: the advantages are too many to give up this methodology.»

«And do you consider the same reasoning valid for individual simulations?»

«Absolutely. The offer of simulations across every sector has empowered the entire species. Every individual can live thousands of experiences, expanding their cultural and intellectual baggage. Whether for education or entertainment, this has been the key to our evolution: simulate, learn, perfect. Only in this way can we live fully here, in the true Original Reality.»

«How then do you explain the growing inequality among individuals?»

«No matter how much technology advances, society will always find a way to split into classes. It doesn't matter how theoretically avoidable or solvable this may be: humanity will keep creating hierarchies. Why? Because it will always need exclusivity, someone to consider inferior, to reinforce its own illusion of superiority.»

The sun shone high in the clear sky. A light, cool breeze brushed against the face of a boy sitting quietly, watching his ant farm. A football was about to hit him square in the face when another boy, passing by, caught it midair and threw it far away.

«Thanks, you just saved my ant farm.»

«No problem.»

«I'm Adam.»

«Silas, nice to meet you.»

The two looked at each other for a moment without saying anything more, then each went on his way.

«Well, see you soon, Adam.»

«Till next time, Silas.»

The End

Closing credits

Dear Reader, I hope I have stimulated and entertained you. Thinking about the origin of reality and how it works has always obsessed me, and this story is a good way to vent my reflections on the subject. It would be a dream to see this story refined and adapted for the big screen.

For me, writing, and in particular writing books, means realizing my own mind. Through my two formats, Codex and BlackBox, I manage to channel what fills my head. I hope to continue carrying these two series forward. The Codex volumes represent the transmission of my knowledge and reflections, while BlackBox contains the stories I want to tell.

As I have already explained on my blog, I am not a professional writer. I try my best so as not to dishonor this art, even though I am aware of my limits. Only now am I starting to understand the frustration that many authors feel. I believe it stems from the inability to fully realize the masterpiece one would like to create. I realize it when I read what I write. But that doesn't stop me, also because very important authors of the past conveyed ideas and stories through works that were recognized only later, even if those texts were not entirely flawless.

We must be realistic about literature and its limits, because words and linguistic structures cannot always contain the whole of thought and imagination.

Regarding upcoming projects, besides continuing the two formats already mentioned, I would like to create a fairy tale for children, which I would love to read to my future kids, based on the very first fantasy book I wrote at eight years old. It was entirely drawn and handwritten, and I still keep it with affection. It is titled *The Eternal Nightmare*. I also have another idea that will have to wait for advances in AI drawing: my great adolescent dream was to create a manga called *NirvanaToNaraka*, a battle-seinen. Unfortunately I am not skilled enough at drawing and never managed to bring it to life.

At twenty-two, little by little I am making my dreams real. There are so many artistic passions I want to pursue, and it will be very difficult to juggle work and daily necessities that consume a lot of time in order to satisfy these desires. But that, after all, is my Telos: to give life to every image in my mind, and to be able to die at peace.